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Vol. XLII, Nos. 3 and 4 July and October 1944

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PRIMITIVE MAN

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PUBLISHED BY THE
CATHOLIC ANTHROPOLOGICAL CONFERENCE
WASHINGTON 17, D. C.

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THE GROS VENTRE SHAKING TENT

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ALTHOUGH the concept of the shaking tent is now known to be a widespread one, relatively few details are available on this rite as it was practiced in the Plains area. The following data, gathered among the Gros Ventres of Montana in 1940 from old and middle-aged informants who had often witnessed the performance, are offered in an attempt to fill in the picture as regards this one tribe.

When speaking English, the Gros Ventres refer to the rite as a "seance" and to the performer as a "spiritualist" inasmuch as it was carried out by a person who had access to the spirit of a deceased relative. The Gros Ventre word for spirit is *tsatsuwaa*, which, incidentally, is the same word they now use for radio. The voice of the spirit can be heard, and, while the spirit cannot be seen, its presence is otherwise manifest by the noise of its activities. Among the latter we note especially the shaking of the tent as the spirit enters and leaves.

When information was desired regarding missing persons, the whereabouts of the enemy, etc., a spiritualist, who might be either a man or a woman, was asked to invoke the spirit over which he or she had control. The pertinent questions were asked and the spirit would supply the answers. There were two general methods of procedure. The so-called seance could be held either in the big dwelling lodge or in a small structure built for the occasion. Furthermore the performance was more or less elaborate, details differing according to circumstances, the individual spiritualist, and even the "personality" of the spirit invoked. But one invariable feature was the shaking of the tent.

The two accounts which follow will illustrate the general pattern as well as the differences in procedure. The first concerns a seance held in the winter at a time when this particular family

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group was more or less permanently encamped. It was told by Mrs. Warrior, now a very old woman, as one of her childhood memories and was not elicited by questioning. 787 [124]

"Many, many years ago when I was a small girl, my father had gone on the warpath with several other men. When winter came they hadn't returned. So my uncle (mother's brother) went to an old woman, Good Singer, who was known to be a spiritualist, although she was famous for other medicine powers as well. She consented and the seance was held in the lodge. My sister and I and our aunts and relatives were all there. 787 539

"A curtain was hung across the back part of the lodge and Good Singer was bound with ropes tightly knotted, then wrapped in a blanket so that only her head stuck out. She was behind the curtain and began to sing a certain song. She told us all to sing that song four times. I joined in the singing. When we finished we heard a humming sound and scraping and all kinds of noise through the opening at the top of the lodge. The top of the lodge began to shake and all at once we heard something slide from the top down behind the curtain where the old woman was, and land with a thump. That was her spirit, that is, the spirit of her son who had died long, long before.

"As soon as they heard the thump my uncle said: 'Here is the offering,' as he handed behind the curtain the pot containing a pup they had killed and cooked. We could hear the dishes rattling as the spirit ate. Soon all of the bones were picked clean and the spirit tossed them over the curtain so that they landed in our midst. The spirit then complained that they had tied his mother so tightly, and as he untied her we could hear the sound of the ropes as he worked at them. Then the ropes too came sailing over the top of the curtain. They were all knotted up in one bunch, and, try as they would, they couldn't unravel it.

"The spirit then complained again: 'Why did you tie my mother up so tightly?' and then asked: 'What did you call me for?' My uncle said: 'Well, I called you because these men went out on a war party and some, including Holy Weasel, didn't return. I want to know where they are and what became of them.' Then my uncle lighted a pipe and put it under the cur-

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787 539 tain. When the spirit finished smoking he put the pipe outside the curtain and my uncle said: 'Well, I want you to hunt my brother-in-law to see where he is or what became of him.' Immediately the spirit made a noise and we could hear it going out of the top of the lodge which shook violently again. The people all sat quietly smoking and listening. Then old Good Singer called from behind the curtain: 'Sing again four times.' So they began to sing and I joined in. After the fourth repetition the spirit came back in the same way as it entered the first time, dropping down behind the curtain and landing with a thump. Every time the spirit goes in or out the top of the lodge shakes. Then the spirit made the exclamation which the Gros Ventres use to indicate that something terrible has happened, and continued: 'You should have told him [Holy Weasel] to stay at home. He and his party were killed. They were raiding the enemy and came across some Piegan. The latter made believe they were meeting the Gros Ventre in a friendly way, but when they got close they killed all the party except one who escaped.'

"Just before the spirit made this last speech, two little boys in the lodge had been playing during that ceremony and the spirit told them: 'Be quiet because I am going to tell you what happened.' And before they knew what happened to them these two little boys landed outside the lodge. The spirit must have pushed them out! And everybody was certainly quiet after that."

The second account will illustrate some differences in procedure when a spiritualist was consulted while a party was on [115] the move and on the look-out for enemies. It was told to me by another old woman informant, Singer Sleeping Bear, incidentally to a long story of one of the journeys made by members of her father's group when she was a small girl.

"The party got as far as Canada and stayed all night. One of the men filled his pipe and took it over to another man, Rising Cross, and said: 'Now here. I am giving you the pipe. I want you to invite your spirit. I want you to ask your spirit if the road is clear (that is, if there is no enemy in sight).' Rising Cross took the pipe and prayed a few moments. The other men

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made a small rounded lodge of willows, just like a sweat lodge. 787
A few of them went in there with the spiritualist who just sat 539
there with them as one of the group. He did, however, smoke the pipe and sing his song. Finally this little lodge shook so hard it almost fell over. It was like a terrible wind. Then a voice said: 'Yes, yes, what do you want?' Rising Cross said: 'Well, we want to know if the way is clear. We are looking for the enemy. How will the way be near where they are?' So the spirit said: 'Well, if you do as I say you are going to kill the chief (the father of a captive Piegan who had married among the Gros Ventres). Go up over the hill and you will see the plain just covered with lodges. If you don't turn back immediately after you kill that one man, you are going to have bad luck.'

"So the young fellows jumped on their fastest horses and went off. They found the situation as described by the spirit. The man whom the spirit mentioned was riding up the trail along the coulee accompanied only by a woman on horseback. When these two had gotten some distance from the lodges in the plain, the young Gros Ventre took after them and killed the man, but the woman wheeled her horse and sped back to the camp to give the alarm. The Gros Ventres said to one another: 'Now you know what the spirit told us. It told us to run just as soon as we killed him.' And the majority was in favor, but one man was obstinate. While they were arguing the enemies approached and were able to overtake most of them. Only a few escaped. It is always someone who doesn't believe the spirit who ruins the party."

That there might occasionally have been some room for 787
doubting the validity of the information received through a par- [15]
ticular spirit is suggested by a comment made by another informant, Al Chandler, a middle-aged man. He had mentioned an old woman spiritualist, David Man's grandmother, and said that she was honest about it and her spirit could be depended upon for the truth. He added, however: "But a man I knew used to hold seances and had his own brother as his spirit. This spirit always lied. When this brother was living he was a liar, so you couldn't expect his spirit to tell the truth!"

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787 As to the way in which the power was acquired, Al Chandler
791 explained as follows: "It was customary to take some hair or a
764 relic of a deceased relative after the body decays. (The Gros Ventres did not use to bury their dead like they do now.) Some would have a bone, others a whole lock of hair, and so on. Now if a person happens to take something the spirit likes, the spirit appears and asks: 'Why do you want that rib (or whatever part one takes)?' The man or woman might answer: 'I want you real near me and I want you to help me whenever I ask you.' That person gets in a kind of trance while the spirit talks to him that first time, and the spirit gives him a particular song which he must sing when he wants to invite the spirit."

Apparently some leeway was allowed the individual in accepting the power, if the following information from Al Chandler can be taken as an indication.

"My adoptive father had the rib of an uncle of his who had been a medicine man of some kind. The spirit appeared to my father and asked: 'Why did you take that? What are you going to do with me?' My father replied: 'This is just for myself. I don't want to be the kind of person who owns spirits. If I need you myself I am going to call on you and I want you to help me, but I am not going to make you a public servant.' And that spirit did help him, personally, once or twice, but my father never got tied up in the ropes [as in the case reported by Mrs. Warrior]. By the way, the person who wants to find out something is the one that ties the spiritualist. He can tie the ropes as tight as he wants to and make as many knots as he pleases. The funny part of it is that it is just like the showmen with handcuffs,—the knots sometimes are still tied just like the person who wanted the information tied them originally,—although sometimes the spirit bunched the ropes all up in a mess. The whole tent shakes, too, and the skeptics look real hard, but the spirit will mock them by saying: 'Well, you need not look because you can't see anything anyway!'"

787 In conclusion I think we can say that the rite fits into the general ceremonial pattern of the Gros Ventres, but it was the only ceremony in which the shaking tent was involved. The

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spiritualist, either man or woman, was approached in the same way as any other " medicine " or " holy " person when it was desired that they exercise their power. For this particular type of clairvoyance the power consisted in control over the spirit of a deceased relative, rather than some other kind of supernatural being. The spirit was invoked by a song learned from the spirit at the time the power was acquired, just as in other cases among the Gros Ventres the being bestowing power gave instructions as to procedure to the recipient. It is characteristic of the seance, however, that there was no set formula beyond the song and the questions could be framed by either the spiritualist or the seeker after information; while the answers were given by the spirit in ordinary language, understood by all, and the spirit made comments appropriate to the particular situation. Whether the regular lodge or a small separate structure were used, whether the Houdini trick was involved, and whether the spirit chose to eat or smoke, seem to be variable features which were employed according to circumstances, and perhaps according to instructions for carrying out the rite received by the individual spiritualist from the spirit along with the song.